

PROLOGUE – May 10, 2027

I'd heard somewhere that people used to think when you lost one sense, your remaining senses were not only heightened, but that a sort of sixth sense was gained. You experienced more, you felt more.

By the time the first quarter of the 21st century came to a close, doctors had discovered that wasn't true. Humans have closer to twenty-one senses, but I could now understand the concept.

I couldn't see.

My entire world was blanketed in total, absolute darkness. No matter how hard I strained my eyes, I could detect not even a hint of light.

No, I couldn't see, but the rest of my senses were alive and tingling in terrified anticipation. Every noise was loud and grating to my ears. I was waiting for one sound in particular, and when I heard it, the very blood in my veins froze and turned to ice.

Footsteps.

It's funny, the minor activities that you experience every day but take for granted. I had certainly heard footsteps countless times before, every time I walked or ran, passing people in the street. It's just that when you hear something so often that is mundane and ordinary, you become desensitized to it... it becomes a background noise that only the subconscious recognizes.

For most of my life, footsteps had been insignificant. Now, they struck fear into my rapidly beating heart.

I drew breath every second of every day; it was vital to living, but I had grown oblivious to the sound of it. Of course, at the moment, I was acutely aware of every breath that I took. I couldn't decide if each breath was precious or a curse.

It's a hard thing to understand unless you've experienced something that really makes you question if your life has been worth living. You start doing a pros and cons list of all the greatest and worst moments in your life and comparing them to your current situation.

Right now, my life's pros and cons list was unequal and heavy on the cons, at least when I considered what I was enduring at present. I thought of every event that had led me here and silently cursed my mother for bearing me. I was on the ledge of deciding I'd rather die than live and ready to give up completely. I had been racking my brain for a way out of this hell, I didn't care if it was by death or escape, but just now, death seemed preferable and honestly, more likely.

My captor had so far left me no opportunities of any kind. I had no idea where I was or how I got here. The last thing I remembered was coming home and putting my groceries away. The next thing I knew, I was here in this darkness, in what I thought might be a basement.

The floor felt cold and unforgivingly hard, I thought maybe concrete. I could be sure of nothing in the total darkness..

Somewhere beyond, there was the steady drip of something leaking, but this clue was meaningless. The air was uncomfortable and brisk with a hint of dampness; I figured this was deliberate so as to impart more discomfort.

My wrists and ankles were rubbed raw where metal shackles that were fastened to the floor prevented me from doing much more than moving mere inches in any direction.

It was terrifyingly barbaric in a world where technology has begun to rule.

I wasn't alone though. Every so often, the cries and screams of another captive rang out. She had been there since I'd woken up.

He called her "Carla" in the same low gravelly singsong voice that he used to say my name right before he took me to his torture chamber.

There was no rhyme or reason to what he did to us there, just whatever seemed to catch his fancy.

Sometimes he would take turns with us and sometimes he would crack a joke that one of us would be "tonight's special."

If there was a point of no return, I was sure I had already crossed it. If Carla was enduring the same agony as me, it was a miracle we were still alive.

Long, deep slices crisscrossed my body. The lights came on for that. He let me see what he was going to do, made me watch what he did.

Powerless to turn away or avert my eyes, I had watched while he held an open flame over one of the few unmarred parts of my body. Burned me until my skin blistered and the stench of seared flesh had filled my nostrils.

I couldn't even close my eyes as he violated me over and over again. Finding new ways with every session was his hobby.

At some point, my body was going to give out, and I prayed that it was soon.

After what seemed like weeks of imprisonment, I knew the exact number of steps it took him to get down the stairwell. Beyond that, the number of steps I heard was directly relative to who he would come to next.

If they stopped getting closer at six, I was safe for at least some time. If I counted to seven, then I knew he was coming for me.

Please don't be me.

I hated myself for thinking that, and I'm sure that was just another aspect of our torture. Never in the darkest part of my soul would I have ever thought that I would wish pain on someone else.

That wasn't who I was, but pain has a way of changing people. I didn't even want him to inflict pain on her, I just didn't want him to hurt me.

I had experienced the entire spectrum of emotion in the span of hours – from hope that I would be let go to the realization that I would not be leaving this place alive.

He enjoyed that.

Toying with our bodies and minds was just one of his games.

"You can't really appreciate the best moments in life if you haven't experienced the worst!" He would say jovially, as if he was giving us some kind of gift.

Above me, the footsteps stopped outside the basement door. From her cell, I heard Carla's sudden intake of breath and subsequent whimper. I'm pretty sure that she was counting too.

His slow, deliberate descent of the stairs only proved to heighten my distress. Everything he did was calculated and designed to inflict torment.

My heart hammered in my chest so hard that I wondered if it could explode from the stress.

One. I swallowed hard.

Two. Even though I was cold, droplets of sweat began to form.

Three. My breaths became ragged as I struggled not to panic.

Four. Every fiber of my being was frozen.

Five. Please God, not me.

Six. I stopped breathing altogether – there seemed to be a pause.

Silence. Was I in the clear?

Seven.